

A Guide For Non-Conformists

WISDOM FROM JAMES

James 4:4

This weekend our elders held our semi-annual retreat. It's a time for looking at ministry, planning, discussing, making sure we are all on the same page, dealing with heart issues, but above all it is a time where we pray. We prayed for one another. We prayed for your prayer requests. We prayed confession. We prayed for the Lord's wisdom. We prayed to ask the Lord to search our hearts. Above all, we prayed.

I love this team of elders. We know it is important to plan, to be on the same page, and to prepare for future ministry. But that's not where our strength and power comes from. We know that our battle is not against flesh and blood, but against principalities and powers. Prayer is the fuel that God uses to power the mission and ministry of the church.

Prayer isn't a token thing in the Christian life. It isn't something we do like it is a box to check. It is a time where we come before God and we talk to him, relating to him, seeking to love him and humble ourselves. And James puts prayer in this context. From 4:6 onwards, he has wanted us to know that God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. So it is no surprise that he calls us to pray in the closing section of this book as it matches the opening call of the book: that if anyone of us lacks wisdom, we should ask of God (1:5). So as we move towards the end of this book, we return to the opening themes of this book: being steadfast in prayer. What does it look like to be steadfast in prayer?

In All Seasons of Life, Pray! (5:13)

Life is full of variations, and James recognizes how life can be good and hard. But he wants us to stay humble even if life is good or hard. So he says, "Is anyone among you suffering? He should pray." The NIV translates this phrase as "Is anyone among you in trouble?" and that is a good understanding of what James is saying. Here is a congregation that has lost jobs, land, friendships, homes, and communities. Some have suffered violence at the hands of persecutors. And so the trouble or suffering here is very general.

But what should be the response to suffering and trouble? We like to fix troubles. We like to tell people how they should make their situation better. We like to come in and propose solutions. The first response, however, is to pray. Prayer is the fuel in the engine that God uses to ignite his purposes and power to remain steadfast, to give wisdom. It isn't the last thing we are to do when we face trouble. Prayer ought to become the first reaction of the Christian life. Are you having trouble? Pray! Pray yourself. Pray with others. Come and gather with God's people to pray.

But it's not just praying when times are hard. James goes on to say, "Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing songs of praise." Prayer isn't just for hard times and when you're having difficulty; it is for those times of life when things are going well. The temptation to forget God and to become proud doesn't only happen when life is challenging and full of troubles; the temptation to forget God in our pride happens when it is going well. We can take the credit for the good

things in life. So James responds and says that if you're happy and you know it, sing songs of praise!

The songs of praise here is a reference to singing Psalms. I don't think that James means that we have to literally sing the Psalms. But he is calling us to sing praises. But there is a great tool in our Bible to pray in any circumstance: it's the book of Psalms. Throughout the history of the Church, Christians have used the book of Psalms to pray prayers of lament, of confession, of adoration, of desperation, of longing, of praise.

John Calvin would say that the book of Psalms, "I have been accustomed to call this book, I think not inappropriately, An Anatomy of the Soul; for there is not an emotion of which anyone can be conscious that is not here represented as in a mirror. Or rather, the Holy Spirit has here drawn to the life all the griefs, sorrows, fears, doubts, hopes, cares, perplexities, in short, all the distracting emotions with which the minds of men are wont to be agitated. The other parts of Scripture contain the commandment which God enjoined his servants to announce to us."

Denis Janz and Sherry E. Jordon, eds., *A Reformation Reader: Primary Texts with Introductions, Augmented & improved [ed.]*. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2002), 205.

We need to pray when we are happy and when we are sad. We pray because it is our confession of humility that we need the Lord.

In Seasons of Suffering, Call Others to Pray (5:14-16)

One of the most challenging sections in James is right here. So it can be helpful to talk about what these verses are not saying. First, these are not the practice of last rites that the Catholic church has said. This is not an example of a healing service where the church decides to have a time for the prayer for the sick. And this is not a passage that is just about spiritual healing.

James says, "Is anyone among you sick?" And here we see someone who is so physically weak that they have to call the elders to come to them. They are worn out. It could be that they have suffered from persecution and the violence against them has caused them to be so wounded that they need prayer (Paul used this language in 2 Cor. 12:10 in this way).

But notice what prayer does: it brings the people of God together. This sick or weak person might feel isolated – that's often what happens when we aren't well. But the sick and wounded person doesn't let their sickness keep them from the people of God – they initiate. They ask the elders of the church to come.

When the elders come, what do they do? They anoint the sick person with oil. This isn't for some medical purpose. In the OT, the anointing that was done was a symbolic act of the presence of the Spirit. It was a declaration of being set apart (Exod. 29-30). Here, the sick person is being set apart for the ministry of the Spirit.

And what happens when the elders come? They pray in faith. It isn't the sick person's faith here – but the prayer of faith by the elders. Far too often, people have been wounded because they have been told that they didn't have enough faith, and that's why they haven't been healed. But that isn't the model of NT healing. It isn't the amount of faith, but the presence of faith in the One who is able to heal.

Further, in this context, there is an opportunity to confess. Too often these verses have been used to ask people if there is some secret sin that they might have. Jesus made it clear in John 9 that a man who was born blind wasn't blind because of his sin but because he was born into a world that was sinful so that God's glory might be displayed. In the same way, the confession here isn't to root out some secret sin or containing the idea that the person might not know their sin. Rather, the sin is obvious and is directly connected to their illness. It could be that the person is suffering because of their reaction against their circumstances of persecution and have been inappropriate. Regardless, James says that they should confess their sin and they will be forgiven.

And then, in the context of prayer, James says that the elders who pray in faith will entrust this person to the Lord and that the prayer of faith is able to see this person raised up – they can experience resurrection power. What does this mean? It means that if God chooses to heal them, they can physically get up (same word in Acts 3:7-8); but if God chooses not to physically heal them, they will be raised up with resurrection power (again, the same word is used for raised up in Acts 4:10-12).

What this means is that the prayer of those who are righteous is powerful. James isn't saying that the righteous are some special category of people who have a gift of healing; rather, they are people who are faithful to the Lord, who love him, and who are in right relationship with one another.

So James draws this general principle: we should confess our sin to one another. We should not let sin keep us apart; rather, we should confess and come together. The Christian community is too precious to be kept apart by sin.

In 1984, at the age of 8, I had a large bone tumour on my left knee. It was the size of a lemon. Within a week of seeing the doctor, I was scheduled for surgery. My parents took me to the elders, and they prayed earnestly for me. The elders anointed me with oil. They prayed for me in faith. They asked God for healing. And a few days later I was in surgery.

There was no miraculous healing for me – I had a painful surgery and a long road of recovery, learning to walk again. But the practice is precious to me – to have elders pray for the sick. And we have done this as elders many times. There are times where you might feel weak in faith, weak in body, and need prayer. Sometimes your mental anguish keeps you from coming to the elders. But the principle here is simple: call us. We love you. We want to pray with you.

In Seasons of Discouragement, See the Example of Those Who Pray (5:17-18)

A Guide for Non-Conformists: Humble Power – James 5:13-18

James knows how we can get discouraged about prayer. He pulls from the OT an example a man of prayer: Elijah. At first glance, this might seem like a strange choice. Elijah was viewed by the Jews as one of the greatest prophets. He was believed to be a man who would come before the arrival of the Messiah (see Malachi 4:5-6). So in one sense, it might be surprising that James picks Elijah as a man of prayer. But in another sense, it is understandable. He says, “Elijah was a man with a nature like ours” – he isn’t that different in a lot of ways. And so James pulls out the example of Elijah from 1 Kings 17. There, in the midst of the wicked king Ahab, Elijah called Israel to repentance. In a day where people were acting in inappropriate ways, not trusting the Lord, disobeying the commandments of God, Elijah prayed.

But nothing in 1 Kings 17:1ff say that Elijah prayed. We are told that he spoke the Word of the Lord and prophesied that it would not rain. But when the rain resumes 3+ years later, it is clear that Elijah prays upon seeing a little cloud in the sky.

In another sense, Elijah is a man just like us. In his day, he remained steadfast and faithful to the Lord. While Israel was turning away from the living God, what did he do? He prayed. He ministered to a widow – showing what true religion looks like. He got discouraged when he thought revival was coming after the great showdown with the prophets of the false god Baal and ended up fleeing for his life. He faced violent persecutors.

Yes, Elijah was a great prophet. But he is a perfect example of a man who faced hard times, remained steadfast under trial, ministered to the most vulnerable, and prayed.

Sometimes we need the examples of people who prayed. We hear the super-hero stories of great faith who prayed 2-3 hours every morning and we despair. How can I pray like that? Where is the power of God? Yet Elijah was a man just like us. He faced discouragement. He saw people turning away from the Lord. He watched his nation slide into apostasy. Yet he remained steadfast under trial, humble, servant-hearted, and praying.

One of the marks of humility is a praying church. And I want to sound this call again. Prayer is the fuel that God uses to display his power in the church. We have prayer and praise nights. We have prayer on Wednesday morning at 9 am. We pray before the service at 9:30 in the east meeting room. We need to come together to pray. In good times and hard times. So let’s make it our aim to confess that we need the Lord all the time.